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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000433

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SUBJECT: EU VISA BAN IMMEDIATELY EFFECTIVE

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4(B,D)  
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¶1. (C) Summary: On April 10, the EU expanded its visa ban list for Belarus from six to 37 senior GOB officials involved in election fraud and human rights abuses. Switzerland announced on April 12 that it would abide by the ban as well.

In the first week of existence the ban has already prevented several of these people from traveling to EU member states. Although not included on the ban, the French Embassy in Minsk also denied a visa to a notorious state propagandist, Yury Azarenok. Azarenok is expected to apply soon for a Greek visa to head Belarus' Eurovision delegation in May. The Latvian DCM, heading the visa ban effort in Minsk, reported that although the ban is in theory open to expansion, in reality it would likely take serious Belarusian human rights abuses to get Brussels to act. He thought that if the U.S. implemented an expanded list, for the sake of parity several EU members may also support expansion of their list. End summary.

The Visa Ban Hits Hard and Fast

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¶2. (U) According to sources in several EU embassies in Minsk, in its first week the visa ban prevented several named individuals from traveling to EU member states. Specifically:

--Natalya Petkevich, Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration, was denied a Czech visa;  
--Nikolay Cherginets, senior parliamentarian, was denied a Schengen visa to Belgium;  
--The German Embassy is revoking Schengen visas previously issued to Head of the Presidential Administration Gennady Nevyglas and to Chairman of the House of Representatives Vladimir Konoplyov.

¶3. (U) In addition, on April 12 the French Embassy denied a Schengen visa for travel to Spain to Yury Azarenok (DPOB 27 February 1965 Vitebsk), notorious state television propagandist responsible for some of the most vile anti-American and anti-Western propaganda. Azarenok, Deputy Chairman of the Belarusian State Radio and TV Company, is not on the EU's visa ban list, but the French felt strongly he should not be allowed to travel. So far Spain, his destination country, has not protested. According to the Belarusian press, Azarenok will head Belarus' delegation to the May 18 to 20 Eurovision contest in Greece.

One Visa Ban Failure

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¶4. (C) Since the visa ban went into effect, Chairman of the

Belarusian State Radio and TV Company Aleksandr Zimovsky traveled for vacation to Cyprus. According to the British DCM, the EU "is having words" with Nicosia over this lapse. Belarusian independent press also announced that Vladimir Shimov, the rector of BSEU university who expelled several students for political reasons before the March elections, traveled to Italy after the elections. The EU debated but decided not to include Shimov or other university rectors on the visa ban list.

#### Hard to Find Data

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15. (C) Poloff met with Latvian DCM Juris Poikans on April 13 to discuss the visa ban (Latvia represents the EU President, Austria, in Minsk). The EU still lacks dates and places of birth (DPOB) for 12 of the 31 new additions to their list. Poikans spoke with a number of Belarusian NGOs and representatives of the political opposition, who said they did not have access to such information. Poikans also pointed out that the list Vienna publicized on April 10 had two errors, erroneously naming two people as heads of district election commissions. Poikans blamed one of these errors on Vienna, which published an earlier draft of the list, but said the second mistake was his, and typified the difficulty in finding information in Belarus. One prominent human rights group insisted to Poikans that a certain individual was the head of a district election commission. Only after the visa ban list was made public did other groups inform him that this person was in fact the deputy. Poikans provided the most recent, corrected list to Poloff. (Post faxed the list to EUR/UMB.)

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#### Can the EU List be Expanded?

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16. (C) Poikans explained that, in theory, the EU visa ban list can be expanded. However, given the reality of the bureaucracy in Brussels, he felt strongly that the EU would only expand the list in reaction to future, serious human rights violations in Belarus. Several countries, namely the Czech Republic, Poland and Lithuania, are pushing the EU to expand the list now. Poikans said Latvia is sympathetic to expansion, but decided not to push the issue now. However, he stated that if the U.S. instituted a visa ban list that included names not on the EU list, Latvia and others would likely use this as a vehicle to pressure Brussels to expand its own list. Poikans claimed some EU countries, such as Denmark, were wavering on whether to include state journalists/propagandists on the EU list. He thought that if such people were included on the U.S. list, this could be enough to convince some EU states to agree to the inclusion of these people on the EU list as well.

#### Belarusian Reaction to the Ban

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17. (U) The GOB unsurprisingly is angry that the EU expanded its visa ban list. Lukashenko began an April 14 press conference by underscoring that, "We (the GOB) won't make black lists and will not follow the way the enlightened Europe has taken." However, he added that people who "intentionally distort information about Belarus or work against the country" would "naturally" be denied entry to Belarus without any use of a visa ban. Claiming that, "Europe has too many problems to want to create new ones," Lukashenko also dismissed any EU threats of economic sanctions. For its part, the MFA announced the visa ban is "uncivilized, short-sighted and without a future." An MFA spokesman claimed the GOB was preparing "adequate measures" in response, but so far no retaliation has been announced.

¶ 8. (U) Several GOB officials on the list have also spoken out against it. MP Sergey Kostyan told the press, "So what? They (the EU) won't give us visas. We have no money to go there anyway and there is nothing to see there except tiled roofs." Leonid Kozik, head of the state-controlled Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus (FTUB), claimed to be "more European than they (the EU members) are," argued the visa ban contradicts the convention of the International Labor Organization, and claimed he might sue the EU officials responsible for this list in international court. (Note: the ILO is investigating the GOB's and FTUB's abuse of independent unions.) Central Election Commission deputy head Nikolay Lozovik announced, apparently ignoring the irony, "The EU infringes on the rights of election officials despite its declared commitment to the principles of justice." MP Nikolay Cherginets lashed out against the visa ban, and posed the question, "If we had dictatorship, how would our oppositionists travel abroad to collect their pay?"

¶ 9. (U) Opposition presidential candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich lauded the visa ban, but claimed it should include hundreds of additional names. Other opposition contacts have called for the inclusion of thousands of GOB officials. (Note: these same groups have stated they cannot provide any of the necessary biographic information.) Russian Ambassador to Belarus Alexander Surikov claimed the ban, "insults the dignity of the Belarusian people," and former Russian Duma Speaker Gennady Seleznev stated the ban is "immoral."

Comment

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¶ 10. (C) A number of GOB officials and opposition members stated before the ban went into effect that visa bans are empty gestures, as the named officials do not travel abroad. The several visa refusals in the first week show the error in this thinking. Several top regime officials have now been personally inconvenienced for their support of Lukashenko, his election falsification and human rights abuses. Post believes that expanding this list, particularly the inclusion of the most odious state "journalists," would be an effective means to sanction Lukashenko's top supporters without hurting the average Belarusian.

Krol